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SUBJECT: KAZAKHSTAN: AMBASSADOR'S PRESS CONFERENCE IN AKTAU

REF: ASTANA 1202

ASTANA 1201

ASTANA 1196

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¶1. SUMMARY: The Ambassador travelled to Aktau on July 15-16. Aktau, located in Mangystau oblast (province) in western Kazakhstan, is a small city known primarily for its oil production and as Kazakhstan's only operational port on the Caspian Sea. While in Aktau, the Ambassador met with Askar Nurgaliyev, Deputy Akim of Mangistau, and afterwards held a press conference at the Akimat (regional government offices). The turnout for the press conference was larger than expected, and the journalists asked more than the perfunctory questions, showing a real interest not only in the substance of the Ambassador's trip, but also in President Obama and in the United States in general. The journalists' questions were thoughtful and wide ranging, as the transcript of the press conference shows, and they illustrate the eagerness among everyday Kazakhstanis to engage with the United States and the Obama Administration. END SUMMARY.

COVENTIONAL -- AND UNCONVENTIONAL -- WISDOM

¶2. "Kazakhstan Today" news agency filed a standard, representative account of the Ambassador's visit. The agency reported that the Ambassador supported investment in Mangistau region, and quoted him, "I, as the American Ambassador in your country, need to understand the details and get acquainted with projects being implemented so I will be able to explain to the U.S. government, to the President of the United States of America, as well as to large investment companies, the benefits of cooperation between our two countries." Along with the television coverage of the visit, "Kazakhstan Today's" report focused on the meetings and tours on the Ambassador's schedule, covering the event in the manner one would expect a provincial media outlet to report on a visiting dignitary.

¶3. However, the questions at the press conference were a surprise. Rather than asking a few questions about the purpose of the visit

and shooting enough quick footage to file perfunctory reports, the reporters stayed to ask a series of questions that were not directly related to the visit. Particularly striking was a question about how Kazakhstanis could reach out to ordinary Americans and teach them more about Kazakhstan, which led to a humorous exchange between the Ambassador and a would-be CNN correspondent. Another example was a question about Kazakhstan's newly-enacted, controversial Internet law, in which the reporter prefaced his question by calling the United States a paragon of democratic development. Reporters also asked eagerly when President Obama would be coming to Kazakhstan. None of these questions is likely to find its way into newspaper stories, but they underlined a hunger for information about and engagement with the United States that contrasts with negative portrayals of the United States in Russia's leading media outlets -- which are a principal new sources for Kazakhstanis. (COMMENT: This very human encounter with western Kazakhstani reporters illustrates that any efforts and resources we are able to focus on countering anti-Americanism in the local media will be amply rewarded. END COMMENT]

¶4. The following is the transcript of the Ambassador's press conference in Aktau, July 15:

Ambassador: I wanted to say, very briefly, thank you to Deputy Akim Nurgaliyev because we have just completed a very, very impressive presentation on the economic, social, and financial growth of Mangistau Oblast (province) and its plans for the future.

I don't really want to waste your time by making a boring speech that might not be very interesting for you. What I would like better is if we could have almost a roundtable. You could ask me many questions and any questions, and we can talk together.

So what questions do you have?

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Q: Which project did you find most interesting?

Ambassador: It would be impossible to say that one project is more interesting than any other. What was most interesting to me was the composite view for the future, and it's in the slogan, "Earth, Sea, and Sky," looking at the entire possibility for future growth.

Q: Why are you here?

Ambassador: As the U.S. Ambassador to Kazakhstan, it is my responsibility to learn as much as I can about the country and its people so that I can inform my government better about the objective realities of the country. So for me this really isn't a vacation; this is part of my work.

Q: What other regions have you visited?

Ambassador: Since I have relatively recently come to Kazakhstan, I have not travelled very extensively. I have visited Atyrau, and I have visited Almaty many times. Next month I will go to Ust-Kamenogorsk. I then plan to visit Shymkent. And, of course, I was in Semipalatinsk with President Nazarbayev in June. Also, in March I was in Baikonur.

Q: This is your first visit to Mangistau. What are your impressions?

Ambassador: I'm just beginning the visit, so I'm sure my impressions will grow during the next two days. But my initial impression is the great possibilities for this city and for the region around this city. In fact, I told the Deputy Akim that I want to come back in 20 years, because I know I will not be able to recognize this area because of the huge growth and development that will happen.

Q: What is your impression of other regions which you have already visited?

Ambassador: When I travel around Kazakhstan, it makes me think of

the United States, because we too are a vast territory with many different kinds of landscapes, from mountains to deserts to great agricultural areas. So I look at Kazakhstan, and I think of the diversity and great variety that exists here. I also recognize the real economic development that has happened since independence in Kazakhstan, and I am also impressed by the special attention that Kazakhstan pays to education for its citizens.

Q: Supplies for Americans in Afghanistan are going through Kazakhstani territory, and especially through the seaport in Aktau. What do you think of Kazakhstan's assistance to the U.S. effort in Afghanistan?

Ambassador: Kazakhstan has for many years been a very good partner in fighting terrorism in Afghanistan and in the region. For many years, we have had over-flight agreements for our state aircraft that are involved in Afghanistan, and we have also had for many years what is called a divert agreement: if our aircraft have problems, they can land at Almaty International Airport for help. This new transit agreement is another positive step, because it allows the transport of non-lethal supplies for our soldiers in Afghanistan through the territory of Kazakhstan. The Obama administration is following a new policy in Afghanistan that we hope will be really successful. President Obama and his advisors and generals know that there is not a really only a military solution for Afghanistan. There must be humanitarian and there must be economic solutions to develop stability and prosperity for that very troubled country. Kazakhstan is playing an increasing role in the humanitarian support for Afghanistan.

Q: What do you think about the recent G8 Summit?

Ambassador: I thought it was interesting that when a journalist

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asked President Obama what he thought of the summit, his response was, "I think sometimes we have too many summits." The problem is that summits can meet and make many decisions, but then the governments involved are responsible for implementing those decisions, and it doesn't always happen. But the real value of these summits is that they allow the leaders and their advisors to talk face to face and to try to solve specific problems, and that's very positive.

Q: I have travelled to America, and many people there don't know much about Kazakhstan. How can we increase interest in and knowledge of Kazakhstan in the United States?

Ambassador: I agree with you. I am sympathetic about that problem. One thing that we need is more international journalists who are actually based here in Kazakhstan so that they can do regular reporting.

Q: How can I become an international journalist? (Laughter)

Ambassador: I have another part to my answer, but let me answer that specifically. CNN International, Cable News Network, is very widely broadcast in the United States and all over the world. They have a regular program where they work with international partners from many countries. If your television stations produce reports, they can be broadcast on CNN International. The press and information section of the American Embassy would be happy to discuss how to do this with you, to take advantage of these kinds of possibilities.

Let me give you another answer to your question. Your embassy, the Embassy of Kazakhstan in Washington, DC, is extremely active and very successful in publicizing Kazakhstan. Your ambassador, Erlan Idrissov, is working on a project right now that will bring Kazakhstani culture to the United States. It will be a six-month program of joint cultural ventures to publicize Kazakhstan. It will involve cinema, music, and theater, and joint ventures between the museums of our countries. So that will be one more step forward.

Q: When is the President of the United States coming to Kazakhstan?

Ambassador: President Obama pays close attention to Kazakhstan. In fact, soon after he was elected, one of his very early telephone calls to foreign leaders was to President Nazarbayev. He has said that he would be honored to visit Kazakhstan, but at this moment it's not on the schedule yet. But I hope during the time that I am United States Ambassador in Kazakhstan, I can welcome and host my President on a visit to your country.

Q: For other countries, the United States is an example of democratic development. In the United States, NGOs are very developed. After our meeting, you are meeting with local NGOs. What will you talk about, and will you talk about the new Internet law?

Ambassador: I don't think that I will talk about the new Internet Law with these NGOs because that law has already been signed. I will talk about the importance of civil society, meaning, in part, NGOs working closely with their government. But let me say something about the Internet Law. Our position, as the U.S. Government, is that it is important now for Kazakhstan not to use that law to limit freedom of speech and to limit freedom of the mass media. We will watch closely how the law is implemented, and we will not be shy to make our views known.

Q: Could you briefly talk about U.S. assistance to Kazakhstan, including in the fields of health care and education?

Ambassador: We have so many programs with Kazakhstan that it would probably take me another hour to describe all of them. We have cooperative programs in economic and financial development and in

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healthcare development. We have many different kinds of educational and professional exchange programs. We have extremely important programs together in non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and in many other areas. We have just had a very good visit by Under Secretary of State Bill Burns with President Nazarbayev, and we agreed that we will establish a Bilateral Cooperation Commission to make our work together a little more rational. This commission will cover all of our areas of cooperation including security, political cooperation, the human dimension, energy, and economic trade and investment.

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